Watergate-Hughes Data Link Probed

12/18/73

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The Senate select Watergate committee is investigating the possibility that the Watergate burglary was an atempt to discover if Democratic National Committee Chairman Lawrence F. O'Brien had any damaging information linking billionaire recluse Howard Hughes and the Nixon administration.

The Senate committee has been told by witnesses in recent closed sessions that the Nixon administration was interested in whether O'Brien's business relationship with the Hughes Tool Co. between 1969 and 1972 had provided him information concerning campaign contributions from Hughes to President Nixon and the business dealings of Mr. Nixon's brothers.

Chief counsel Samuel Dash acknowledged yesterday that the Senate committee is pursuing the "theory" that the June 17, 1972 Watergate break-in was carried out to discover what information, if any, O'Brien had about activities involving Hughes that could prove embarrassing to the Nixon re-election campaign.

"That's a theory," Dash said. "This is one of a number of theories we are presently operating on. This is a viable theory. It may not prove to be true, but it is one we are operating on at the moment."

The Senate committee staff's investigation of a possible tie between the Hughes-Nixon relationships and the Watergate break-in indicates that the committee

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is still not satisfied that it has been given an adequate explanation of the burglary and bugging of the Democrats' Watergate headquarters.

In addition having served as Democratic National Committee chairman from 1969 to mid-1972, O'Brien also heads a public relations firm that, he has acknowledged publicly, was on a retainer from Hughes beginning in 1969. O'Brien could not be reached for comment yesterday.

The new direction of the committees investigation was made public yesterday in federal court papers filed in connection with a suit by employees of the Hughes empire who are seeking to bar the Senate committee from questioning them in private session. A federal judge has thus far refused to stop the committee from privately questioning the Hughes employes.

Among the documents filed in connection with the suit is the transcript of the Senate committee's Dec. 4 executive session in which the committee's lawyers made reference to other closed session testimony that the Nixon Administration was interested in the extent of O'Brien's knowledge about connections between the Hughes organization and Nixon.

The bulk of the four-hour session with Davis involved wrangling over what documents he was required to produce for the committee. But Dash and assistant committee chief counsel Terry F. Lenzner summarized for the record earlier testimony gathered by the staff while investigating the $100,000 purported campaign contribution from Hughes that was given to President Nixon's friend, Charles G. (Bebe) Rebozo.

Although it has been known for several weeks that the Senate committee was investigating hte $100,000 contribution from Hughes—as well as the relationship of President Nixon's brother, F. Donald Nixon, to Hughes aide John Meier and Hughes business dealings in Nevada—the minutes of the Dec. 4 committee session are the first suggestion that Hughes may be connected to the Watergate break-in and attempted bugging of O'Brien's telephone.

At one point in the Dec. 4 session, Dash stated:

"Mr. O'Brien's files were the subject of search in the break-in of the Democratic National Committee. It now appears from testimony that we are receiving that the relationship that Mr. O'Brien has with the Hughes Tool Co., and his personal knowledge of the particular matters we are now inquiring into — his own personal knowledge of the contribution involving this money (the $100,000), his own personal knowledge of any relationships between Mr. Meier, Mr. Donald Nixon, and all these other matters — may have been the basis and reason for the break-in in the Democratic National Headquarters and for the wiretapping of Mr. O'Brien."

Comments made by assistant chief counsel Lenzner indicate that the Watergate break-in may have been generated by the same concern

that caused an earlier but apparently abortive attempt to burglarize the safe of Las Vegas newspaper publisher Henry Greenspun. The committee already has heard public testimony from Watergate conspirators James W. McCord and E. Howard Hunt Jr. about the attempted Las Vegas burglary.

Lenzner indicated that the staff was "looking at" a discussion among deputy Nixon campaign manager Jeb Stuart Magruder, Attorney General John N. Mitchell and Watergate conspirator G. Gordon Liddy concerning a "possible break-in" of Greenspun's safe.

Lenzner went on to say that the administration was at that time investigating whether Greenspun had information concerning the $100,000 donation from Hughes to Rebozo and whether Greenspun had information relating to relationship between Meier and President Nixon's brothers, Donald and Edward.

"Thirdly," Lenzner said, "we have received allegations in our interviews and testimony that the $100,000, while stated by Mr. Rebozo to have been for the (1972) presidential election, served a dual purpose; that the other purpose was that it was to be consideration in return for which the Hughes Tool Corporation received special benefits, special decisions by the administration on a variety of matters."